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The Good Steward of the CIA

GEORGE BUSH served for fifty weeks and four days, from January 30, 1976, as director of the Central Intelligence Agency—the first politician to the post. His job was to protect Gerald Ford against surprises on the intelligence front. From the moment Richard Nixon stepped into Marine One in August 1974, Ford was running for election. As polling day neared, Bush was to be an important element in the campaign. Both the President and the Agency needed a DCI who would not be panicked by any new media stampede.

Bush was tough. His war record, his achievements—in Texas and in Republican politics—all spoke for him. Chairman of the Republican National Committee during Watergate, he had impressed Republicans as a caring man who had not quailed under fire. The almost complete abolition of secrecy had made the post of DCI—and the Administration—extremely vulnerable. So the party's troubleshooter was put in charge at Langley.

Bush was not appointed to politicize the Agency; instead he went there precisely because its position had become intensely political. The political essence of his tenure was underlined when, on January 20, 1977, he became the first DCI to leave because of a change at the White House.

Bush himself claims that he had responded to the call of duty; that the post was a political dead end. But in Bush there is a strong element of the *faux naif*. He acts dumber than he really is. At the beginning, the old hands on the Hill saw it as a step to the Presidency and insisted that Ford announce that Bush not be his running-mate in 1976. Bush, despite his denials, obviously saw the job for what it was too. "Give Frank Church a call," he said. "Tell him I'm a tame elephant."

The country had lost confidence in those apparently responsible for its management. The Agency was for many a synecdoche for embarrassment, inefficiency, and arrogant elitism: all qualities associated with what had gone wrong in Vietnam and with Nixon. Bush's job was to put that behind Ford and the Agency.

One of his first acts was to shake up the Agency's leadership. The Hill and the country were in general agreement that the top brass should be seen to pay for the painful revelations and worse suspicions plowed up by investigations by the press, Congress, and presidential commissions. Within six months of Bush's arrival, 11 of the 14 top Agency administrators had been changed.

He was nevertheless mindful of his constituents, restoring morale in the Agency by listening to the professionals and making it clear that the buck stopped with him. E. Hank Knoche, a pleasant, fun-loving longtime officer, became his deputy, signaling to those inside the Agency that Bush had not lost confidence in the whole enterprise, and to those watching outside that nothing very dangerous was likely to be initiated. It was a message appreciated by a staff that had had enough excitement, and by Republicans with an incumbent President in an election year. Bush handled Congress with the skill of an ex-member, appearing on the Hill 51 times in less than a year, drawing on the capital of his friendships and connections to take the heat off the CIA.

The extraordinary intra-Agency Team A/Team B ("Cassandra") debate about Soviet resources, capabilities, and intentions took place during 1976. It was a major political and bureaucratic challenge to the CIA's status and reputation, mounted by a formidable coalition of neoconservative intellectuals and movement conservative opponents of the détente consensus of the early 1970s. Bush loyally sided with Team A's view, which was not gravely alarmed.

Bush saw the President every week. He made a point of being non-partisan, while proving himself to be an effective political operator. He went to the Agency to make it as ordinary as possible, to impart a steadiness of tone, and in weeks he conveyed that identification with the Company which his successor, Stansfield Turner, failed to achieve in four years. Also within weeks, both he and Langley were out of the headlines.

Bush did not attempt to leave a personal mark. The closest he came was giving the British access to satellite surveillance of the Soviet Union and other parts of the world. He was acting politically again. Following the inquiries into the CIA, allied intelligence outfits had become very nervous of continuing to cooperate. Four Latin American secret services had actually broken their contacts with the Agency. Bush was seeking to demonstrate the value of coöperation with U.S. intelligence.

THE CIA HAS GIVEN Bush his main executive experience so far. He displayed loyalty, uprightness, and efficiency. Intelligently and worthily uncreative, he was not asked to be otherwise. He showed himself, however, to be more capable than he looked, with that strong sense of obligation downward which energizes and renews battered institutions, and generates strong personal followings. He proved to be a classic custodian: making sure all was ship-shape on his watch. His people knew that they would not be served up piecemeal to posturing politicians and excitable journalists. He did more for Agency morale than any DCI since Allen Dulles, and was rewarded with the Agency's loyalty and liking, and its long-term support. Many CIA people rooted for him in 1980; Dan Murphy, a deputy director, became Vice President Bush's chief of staff.

As 1976 wound down, Bush had to brief the President-elect. His team was explaining a particular problem due to come to a head around 1985. Carter held up his hand: "I don't need to worry about that," he said, looking at Bush. "By then George will be President and he can take care of it."

—JOHN RANELAGH

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